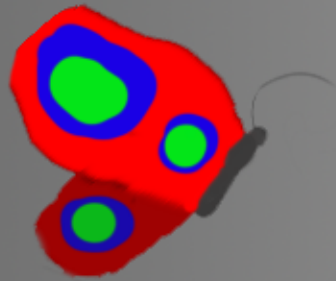


JOHN 11:35



John 11:35

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To E., ya moron.

Table of Contents

Introduction

King of the Forest

How We Got Our Bite

Civilization

Snow on Snow

Excerpt from 'The Summer of the Comet Children'

Dinner and A Freak Show

Dance Dance Substitution

Cupcake

On Tap

It's a Sordid Story

You Look Smashing!

There Will Be Blood Oranges

Latte Be

Introduction: The Ha'kanas

The word 'ha'kana' is from the Clawbearer for 'what are you pointing at', and is used as a general term for members of the superorder of the same name. In the early Jurassic (Hettangian), an unknown party or parties transplanted the haramiyid *Thomasia* from its home on the planet Earth, to the planet Feverfog, possibly accidentally. It arrived, along with several contemporary lifeforms, on a planet that had recently (less than a million years prior) experienced a mass extinction comparable to Earth's end-Permian event. The transplanted animals and plants rapidly diversified, replacing most of what was left of the native life. *Thomasia* itself spawned four main clades, classified as follows:

True ha'kanas (*Hakanamorpha*): small, omnivorous or herbivorous quadrupeds, with rodentiform incisors and sizable canines. Dental formula either $(I^3C^1P^4M^3)/(I_3C_0P_4M_3) = 42$ or $(I^3C^1P^4M^3)/(I_3C_1P_4M_3) = 44$. Short, rounded torsos with short legs and large heads. Digits bear nails. Some are green, due to symbiotic algæ in fur. All except baaswe 'kana lack tails. 24 species in four genera.

Tree ha'kanas (*Dryohakanamorpha*): minuscule to very large bipeds and non-obligate quadrupeds, with dental formula $(I^3C^1P^4M^3)/(I_3C_0P_4M_3) = 42$, except for

Homohakana antiquus (water gulpaaru), which has a formula of $(I^3C^1P^4M^3)/(I_3C_1P_4M_3) = 44$ and *Dryohakana major* (chakurah) which has a formula of $(I^3C^1P^4M^0)/(I_3C_0P_4M_1) = 32$. Short torsos with narrow waists and long limbs.

Digits bear hooves. Members of the chakurah clade have reduced tails, members of the humanoid clade have well-developed ones. Most lack symbiotic algæ. All possess opposable thumbs. All except se'puur are carnivores. 23 species in six genera.

Daanh and allies (*Parahakanamorphs*): minuscule to obscenely large quadrupeds, with dental formula $(I^2C^1P^4M^3)/(I_2C_1P_4M_3) = 40$. Elongate torsos and short limbs with long tails and small heads. Digits bear claws. 10 species in two genera.

Warp otters (*Lutrahakanamorphs*): large to very large carnivores, resembling otters without hind-limbs. Dental formula $(I^2C^1P^4M^1)/(I_2C_1P_4M_1) = 32$. As the name implies, can create rifts in space-time, which are used as a means of travel and a hiding place from which to ambush prey. Front paws zygodactyl (after the manner of an Earth parrot), bearing claws. Eight species in two genera.

Species Profile: Chakurah

Origin: Feverfog, Sansan Island, earliest Pliocene. Small to medium (females up to 1.2m in length and 2kg in weight, males up to 75cm and 1.5kg in weight) non-obligate quadrupedal carnivore. HIGHLY VENOMOUS AND AGGRESSIVE. Thoroughly adapted to an arboreal lifestyle, to the point of being unable to walk on the ground, and having to hop instead like some Earth squirrels. Off-white to gray fur. Melanistic specimens are common in some areas. Eyes brown. Pupils slit-shaped. Five digits on front paws, two on rear. Digits bear hooves. Forelimbs up to twice the length of hind-limbs, with distinctly s-curved upper arm. Broods single egg (black, pear-shaped, wider on one end, with two broad blue stripes on broad end) internally, then lays it approximately a month before hatching. Mother solely responsible for external incubation, is provisioned during this time by mate and older offspring. Gestation period: 8 months. Age at weaning: 7 months. Age at maturity: one year. Lifespan: up to 120 years.

King of the Forest

A man comes and asks the creatures of the forest if they rule it, one by one.

The fumak says, "I am clever, but I am not king of the forest."

The se-te'tehka says, "I am swift, but I am not king of the forest."

The ikja-se says, "I am strong, but I am not king of the forest."

The ha'kana says, "I am sly, but I am not king of the forest."

The khii-mæ says, "I am brave, but I am not king of the forest."

The vlisah says, "I am savage, but I am not king of the forest."

The tumu-gul says, "I am silent, but I am not king of the forest."

Finally, the man gathers them all together and asks,

"Then who is king of the forest?"

They tell him, "The chakurah is king, for he is Death given flesh and blood."

Species Profile: Ikja-se (Daanh)

Obscenely large (both sexes up to 20m in length [without the tail] and 4 tons in weight) quadrupedal carnivore. Solitary. Thick prehensile tail typically as long as body. Small, dark brown eyes with round pupils. Neck is same width as the small, broad head. Fur varies in color and pattern, most commonly one of the following: black with white forelimbs and shoulders, brown with cream belly, or solid red-brown with black bands on tail. Albinos are occasionally found. Fairly intelligent, enough that captive specimens can be taught to read at similar proficiency to a 10-year-old human. They like cookbooks, especially illustrated ones. Lays 6-8 gray eggs in a well-hidden nest. Most will not hatch, or will be stolen by other carnivores. Once the eggs have hatched, the mother abandons the nest, expecting the precocial newborns to follow. They remain with her for at least a year, by which time they are one-quarter adult size. Age at weaning: 10 weeks. Age at sexual maturity: 5 years. Lifespan: 50 years.

How We Got Our Bite

In those days the forest was empty, and Sumanuil in all her wisdom looked down and said to herself,

'This is not how it is supposed to be.'

So she started making creatures to live in the forest. First she made one with four small paws, a long stiff tail and stripes and called it 'khii-mæ'. But it was lonesome, so she made more.

She made one with four small paws and long ears, and called it 'ha'kana'. She made one with four small paws, long claws and sharp teeth and called it 'vlisah'.

She made one with four large paws, a thick tail and a long back and called it 'ikja-se'.

She made one with clever hands and bright eyes and called it 'fumak'.

She made one with two wings and great jaws and called it 'se'te-tehka'.

Then she had a little magic left over, so she made a little white creature with hands and a short tail, and she called it 'chakurah'.

Now in those days, no creature could fight ikja-se, so he was king. And he was a terrible and arbitrary king. He pulled on khii-mæ's jaws until they fell

open down to her chest, and so it remains today. He tugged on fumak's ears until they were almost as large as he, and so it remains today. He bit off ha'kana's proud tail, and so it remains today. He knocked out all of vlisah's teeth besides her eyeteeth and gnawers, and so it remains today.

All the other creatures grew tired of this, so they secretly called a meeting to decide what to do. But none could think of a way to defeat ikja-se, so they were about to leave again, when chakurah spoke up.

'I will fight ikja-se!'

All the others laughed and told her,

'You are small; you don't even have claws or fangs! Go back to your den, maybe you will be more sensible tomorrow!'

So she ran from them, back to her den. There she began to pray.

'I want to help, but they laughed at me and said I could not. Sumanuil, give me strength so I can fight ikja-se!'

She repeated this prayer until she could keep it up no longer and fell into a deep sleep.

When she woke in the morning, she was still small and weak, so she began to sob wretchedly, wondering what the others thought of her. Then the voice of Sumanuil spoke in her ear, saying,

'I have granted your wish. Open your mouth.'

Chakurah took a deep breath to steady herself, then did as she was instructed. Her jaws felt different somehow, so she looked at herself in a puddle. She had two great poison teeth now! Filled with courage, she went to ikja-se's den, where he still slept inside, being as lazy as he was cruel, and shouted,

'Come out! I will fight you!'

Ikja-se stuck his broad head out and said,

'Go away.'

So chakurah opened her mouth to show him her new poison teeth, and he was suddenly filled with fear and trembled, saying,

'Do not hurt me! I am weak!'

And chakurah told him,

'Indeed, you are weak. Now you will bow before the other creatures. Ha'kana will steal half of your mate's eggs, and khii-mæ half your children. Vlisah will drink your blood, fumak will lead your other children away to their doom and se'te-tehka will snatch your life away when you grow old. You will be the least of all.' And so it remains today.

Species Profile: Khii

Origin: Earth, Antarctica, mid-Eocene. Large to very large (males up to 3m in height and 320kg in weight, females up to 2.5m and 225kg) biped.

Carnivorous. Short beige or gray fur. Beige individuals have black eyes, gray ones blue. Pupils round. 8 to 10 black stripes on lower back and base of heavy stiff tail, stripes usually carefully concealed by clothing. Five digits on both hands and feet. Digits bear claws. May not be a true marsupial, though it breeds in a similar manner, giving birth to one to three underdeveloped young that complete their development in a pouch. Young that have left the pouch may ride by hanging on to mother's tail. Gestation period: 2 months. Age at weaning: 18 months. Age at sexual maturity: 25 years. Lifespan: up to 150 years.

Civilization

One morning, a khii named Tor woke up alone. At first, he did not know he was alone, of course. As his dark eyes opened and his pointed ears perked up, the first thing he noticed was the darkness and silence. Usually, by this hour, his mother had gotten up, turned the lights on, and begun making breakfast. But this morning there was none of that.

Of course, his people had been talking of leaving for months, but no one had bothered to tell him. They had all assumed that he read the newspaper, which he did not, or that his mother would tell him, which she had forgotten.

He got dressed and went outside, but there was no one about. He went to the call center where he worked, but it was as dark and silent as his home. He sat down at a workstation and put on a headset. There wasn't even a dial tone. He took it off and went home, then climbed back into bed wondering what happened.

The next morning was the same, dark and silent, only now punctuated by hunger. So he left home once more, went down the street to a bakery, and stole a loaf of now-stale bread. Then he went to the butcher shop next door. He found only a single bratwurst. So he made a sandwich and sat down on a park

bench to consider his options.

He realized by now that he was alone, and there was nothing to be done about that, but, being a khii, he needed something to do or he would destroy everything in sight. Also, being a khii, that something needed an element of practicality. He could no longer sell double-glazing, an eminently necessary thing, so he had to do something else just as useful.

So he decided to bring civilization to those bipedal apes he had seen in a public television special. And when he thought of civilization, one thing sprang to mind: his mother's blackberry crumble recipe. Yes, that's a good place to start, he thought. Nice things made with fruit are the basis of civilized life.

So he gathered up his ingredients in their most basic form and put them on a ship. He packed grain plants, blackberry creepers, a lemon tree, a pistachio tree, vanilla orchids, sugar canes, and a chest freezer full of butter, since he feared a cow would eat the plants, never mind that he couldn't find one. He packed extra food for himself so he would not have to eat his ingredients before he got to Africa, and set out.

There was just one problem. He neglected to pack a map. So his little ship drifted north when he wanted to go northwest, and he landed in Asia.

When he went ashore, he walked past an *Enhydriodon*. The great otter

watched him, and decided she wanted his little ship for herself. So she snuck on board while Tor was trying to explain his mother's recipe to a troop of *Gigantopithecus*. But what did she find on board? Plants! So she decided Tor must be insane. To steal from a khii was risky enough; to steal from a mad one, suicidal. She disembarked and retreated into the forest.

After a very frustrating afternoon, Tor handed the leader of the troop a copy of the recipe and went back to his ship. It smelled rather odd on board, so he searched the ship, and finding nothing amiss, he set off again, following the coast this time.

Several weeks later, he found a stretch of coast that looked very much like what he had seen on television, so he picked a sheltered inlet, anchored the ship, and went ashore.

But when he saw the creatures he had been looking for, they ran away, screeching in terror. What was so terrible about him? Sure, he had great jaws full of teeth and six-centimeter claws, but so did every person he had ever known. There was nothing frightening about him! He sold double-glazing for a living! But somehow, they were afraid of him. Maybe, he thought, he could win them over with what he had brought with him.

So he built a stone oven, lit a fire in it, rather inexpertly, mind you, and got

his ingredients out. Then he started baking. Soon the smell began to draw the apes back, and Tor soon had a sizable audience, which pleased him greatly.

“Would you like to know how to make this?” he asked.

All he got was non-comprehending looks. Time to try a different approach.

He picked up the tray of crumble he had just finished baking and walked toward the nearest member of his audience, who fled in terror at his approach. This caused the others to panic, and in a few moments Tor was alone once more, so he sat by his oven and ate the tray of crumble himself before returning to his little ship for the night.

The next day, he went ashore again, re-lit his oven, and made another batch. Once again he soon attracted an audience, but this time it was not apes, it was a family of *Dinofelis*.

“Would you like to learn how to make this?”

The mother *Dinofelis* shook her head, then turned and left with her cubs following. Tor wondered if he should go and look for the apes, then decided against it. Besides, like the *Dinofelis*, he needed meat. His shipboard supply had run out, and so he needed to hunt.

Hunting was harder than it looked on television, as it turned out, and so he returned to his oven empty-handed, ate the crumble, and went back to his

ship to sleep.

The next morning, he set out bright and early and managed to catch a rabbit. He re-lit his oven, cooked it, then cooked another batch of crumble. He sat and started to eat the rabbit while he waited.

The smell of cooked meat attracted a bit of attention, even if the crumble did not. A hyena sidled up, and gave Tor a look over.

“Would you like the recipe?” he asked, holding out the tray of crumble.

She told him she would consider it, but only if he gave her the rest of the rabbit.

“Very well.”

So he gave her the rest of the rabbit, and she devoured it.

“Well, do you want the recipe?”

She sat there a moment, looking thoughtful, yawned briefly, then told him,

“No, but thank you for the rabbit.”

Then she walked away, and Tor was alone again. He waited for a few more hours, ate the tray of crumble, and returned to his ship.

The day after, he managed to catch another rabbit, but returned to his ship to cook it, having learned his lesson. This time he was able to eat in peace.

Afterward, he went back ashore, to find the apes had returned. Once more

he re-lit his oven, and baked a batch of crumble. Then he walked towards the nearest, stopped about halfway, set the tray down and retreated. This time, they did not flee. Instead, the nearest ape waited until he retreated, then walked up to the tray and stuck a finger in the crumble. He fished out a bit of it, ate, and seemed to like it. He glanced around, making sure his superiors were not watching, then wolfed down the rest. Then he and the others retreated into the forest.

The next day when Tor came ashore, there were no apes to be found, but there was a civet perched on top of his oven. When he approached, she told him,

“I heard you are good at catching rabbits. Give me one and I might consider taking your blackberry crumble recipe.”

Tor was not about to fall for this twice, so he picked up the civet and hurled her as far into the forest as he could manage. He prayed the hyena hadn't told anyone else about that trick, and baked another batch of crumble while muttering to himself, using words I shall not repeat here.

He was so distracted that when he looked up and saw the apes had returned, he gasped in surprise and nearly dropped the tray he was taking out of the oven, which would have been a disaster as he might have broken it and did not have a second tray. This time, they were gathered in a semi-circle not

more than fifty feet away.

“Would you like some?”

The leader of the troop nodded, approached, and held out a hand, in which Tor placed a paper plate of crumble. He ate the crumble, set the plate aside, then sat there for a moment before leading the others away. Tor ate the rest himself.

The next morning, the apes were waiting when Tor came ashore. Once more, he baked a batch of crumble. Then he asked,

“Would you like to learn how to make this?”

Several of them nodded. Tor explained his mother’s recipe, while pointing to the various steps on the written instructions. The apes watched him intently, then ate the samples he passed out, before leaving again.

The next morning, they were waiting for him. They watched as he got out his ingredients. Tor noted mentally that he was running out of some of them, then said,

“See? We have all the ingredients here.”

Some of them nodded, as if to say,

“Go on, we’re listening.”

So he continued, greasing the tray, mixing the ingredients, placing them in the tray and baking. When he was done, he passed out samples again, they ate

them and left again.

The next day, he asked,

“Would someone like to help?”

He had several eager volunteers raising hands, and picked one. He walked her through the steps, and then passed out the result.

The next day, the apes were absent, because the hyena was back.

“I am not catching you another rabbit.”

“Yes, you are, or I will smash your baking tray.”

“You drive a hard bargain.”

So Tor spent the day catching rabbits for the hyena and her family. Her family was quite large, so by the time he had satisfied them it was fully dark, and he returned to his ship having accomplished nothing.

The next day, the hyena was gone, thank goodness, but so were the apes. He waited a while, but no one came, so he returned to his ship.

The day after that, the apes were back, and trying to light his oven.

“No, no! Let me show you!”

So he spent the day teaching them how to light and control fire, then caught a rabbit and went back to his ship to eat it in peace.

The next morning, the apes were waiting again, and they had lit the oven

for him! So he went through the steps again with a volunteer, and when they were done and had eaten and left, he went back to his ship.

The next day, the apes were not there, but the civet was perched on a rock with her muzzle in a crudely-made container full of what looked like an attempted crumble.

“G’wan! Git!”

The civet ignored him and continued eating.

“Little snot! You want me to make civet pot pie next?!”

Still she ignored him, so once more he picked her up and hurled her into the forest. He tasted what remained of the attempted crumble, and found it to be quite good, despite stinking of civet. He waited a while, but no one came, so he returned to his ship.

The next day it rained heavily, so Tor stayed on his ship. The day after was also rainy, and the day after that, and the day after.

Several months passed, and when Tor went ashore again after it finally stopped raining, he saw that his oven had been washed away, but another had been built nearby.

The apes were nowhere in sight, but inside the oven, a perfect crumble had just finished baking.

Snow on Snow

Dark, dark and cold. The administrative building hadn't been renovated since it was built, in the days when the khii government thought central heating lowered productivity by making people think they hadn't left home. And no one could do anything about the darkness. At least not on this outpost's budget. Machei shivered and tried to focus on typing.

Another report on the reluctance of the native population to work this far from the coast. They insisted that the interior was haunted, that they could hear ghosts coughing from inside the trees. Why the ghosts coughed, no one had bothered to ask their native liaison, as usual. No one ever asked meaningful questions around here. Like about the light. Machei could see a patch of sunlight from the window behind his cubicle, which was pressed up against the south wall. Actually, all the walls were south walls. They were at the pole, after all.

Anyway, about every twelve hours or so for the last month, a stream of daylight would come in this particular window, and persist for several hours.

The interval of light was increasing in length, in fact. This was something new. Machei had worked here for seven years, and that window had never displayed anything other than moonlight in the winter. When it wasn't raining,

of course. But now there was sunshine. Machei knew he should report it, but he liked the warmth on his back, and he knew his superiors would probably put up curtains.

Days passed, and the sunlight grew brighter and more persistent, and covered a larger area as well. If Machei turned around in his chair, he could see strange trees through the light. Trees with broad leaves, and in one case, big pink flowers. Wherever THAT tree was, it certainly wasn't here. He decided that he would take a closer look on his day off.

Four almost-interminable days later, and his day off had arrived. Trying not to draw too much attention to himself, he casually strolled outside and through the rain in the general direction of the light. It was beyond a low fence, in the midst of a disused cemetery. They had stopped burying people here years ago, when the cost to ship them home decreased enough to fit into the budget without raising it beyond the tolerance of the public.

There it was, fainter now but still clearly visible. Why no one had put up barriers, Machei could not fathom. Surely someone important would have declared the area unsafe by now, put up warning signs at least? Alas, nothing in the way, not even a wet floor sign. Bracing himself, he walked up to the light and stepped through.

He found himself in another cemetery. It was warm, humid as well. After the moonlight at the base, it took his eyes a moment to adjust.

When he had recovered, he looked around. There was a brick building partway down the hill he stood on, across a path. It looked old. Some of the windows were gone, and sections of the roof were missing. His ears swiveled at the sounds of small winged animals flying from the openings. He did not recognize them, dark shapes streaming out as the sun went down. A few lights were visible downhill to the south, across the remains of a large road. They looked like campfires. Probably were campfires, for that matter. He could see no intact buildings, though the bombed-out remains of several very large ones were visible on the horizon.

There was no telling if the locals would be friendly, but it was getting dark and the temperature was dropping rapidly, so he realized he would soon have very little choice in the matter. He had packed a sandwich, but he had not thought to bring the materials to start a fire. He was beginning to wonder if this had been a good idea. Even worse, he could no longer see the opening he came through. That settled it. He would have to try to befriend the natives. He half-walked, half-skidded down the steep hillside, stopped at the bottom, straightened his uniform in an attempt to look dignified, and crossed the road.

The lights vanished and he was left in darkness. Machei cleared his throat in the most formal manner he could manage and announced,

“I am Third Assistant Clerk Machei D'awer. Who are you? Why did you put your fire out?”

There was a brief silence, followed by shrill, feminine laughter, which broke down into a coughing fit. A light reappeared some distance away. He moved toward it. The light vanished again just as it seemed he would reach it.

More laughter, which again turned into coughing. He stopped and tried to put on an authoritative scowl. It clearly didn't work, as it was met with more laughter, then more coughing. Something pinched him on the rear. He wheeled around and saw nothing. More laughter, this time deeper and longer, without the coughing afterward. He suddenly found himself shoved sideways with considerable force. He fell, and found himself floundering in waist-deep water.

He managed to right himself and stood there a moment. The water was icy cold, and something heavy and broad slid across his foot. He recoiled, fell and scrambled out of the water. He was soaking wet and it was beginning to snow.

He staggered back to the road, and saw a light atop the hill. Something moved between him and the light, something about half his height that walked erect. He tried to climb the hill, but collapsed halfway up. He lay there a while, then found

himself looking up at a person standing over him. It was pale, small, short-snouted and seemingly nearly hairless, but it was probably a person. It smiled at him, showing a mouthful of stained, blunt teeth, and held out something on the end of a stick.

“Marshmallow?” it asked.

Machei grabbed for the stick, and missed. The strange person laughed and backed away towards the light a bit, then sat down, still holding the stick towards Machei, who started crawling, as he was so cold it seemed like he could not properly walk. The stranger backed off again. He kept crawling.

It shrugged, then walked up and handed him the stick. He could see it more clearly now. Its skin, mostly bare, was deathly pale. It was wearing a shirt with two people like itself holding hands depicted on it. It was also wearing glasses, and its head was topped with a patch of dark fur.

Machei fumbled with the stick for a moment, before managing to put the stuff on the end in his mouth. It certainly had smelled good, but it tasted like ashes. He looked up. The strange person laughed again and crumbled to dust. A chill wind picked up and blew it away. The light on top of the hill went out a moment later. Machei was starting to feel warm and sleepy, but he somehow picked himself up and made it back to where the opening had been.

Nothing but graves and vegetation. He sagged to the ground and curled up, sobbing. The snow covered him.

“Where did you find it?”

“In the old cemetery, soaked to the skin and lying on the ground.”

“What is it?”

“Not sure. It’s not like he told us.”

Machei awoke slowly. Something didn’t add up. He was in a bed. And dry. More of those strange people were gathered around. And one of them had a large needle. It came towards him, and rubbed something on his arm. Was it going to draw blood? He asked it, but it didn’t seem to understand. Or maybe it just wasn’t listening.

It placed a tourniquet around his upper arm, drew a needleful of blood, then put a bandage on his arm, removed the tourniquet and departed. Someone else put another needle in his other arm, and he passed out.

This sequence, blood draw followed by sedation, repeated itself for what seemed like weeks, every time he woke up. Then one day, he woke up alone. He got up, his atrophied muscles screaming in protest, and managed to reach the door. It was locked from the outside. He leaned his weight against it, and it gave a little. He backed up and threw himself against it, and the hinges broke. Then

he heard a sound, the bawling of an unhappy infant. He followed the sound into the next room. This was much the same as the room he had been in, only it contained an incubator instead of a bed. In the incubator was what looked like it was probably one of the strange people's newborns. He walked over and looked down at it. It stopped crying, and blinked sleepily up at him through his eyes.

Species Profile: Artificial Hybrid

Origin: Earth, North America, early Anthropocene. Large (males to 2.1m in height and 100kg in weight, females to 1.75m and 75kg in weight) biped. Genetically engineered life-form. Omnivorous, but often lactose intolerant as adults. Largely hairless, extremely similar to human in appearance, aside from large canine teeth. Five digits on both hands and feet. Digits bear claws. Viviparous, bearing two to three well-developed young. Gestation period: 9 months. Age at weaning: 20 months. Age at sexual maturity: 12-15 years. Lifespan: uncertain, probably in excess of 300 years.

Excerpt from 'The Summer of the Comet Children'

The morning of December 29th came crisply, covering the area with a layer of light, powdery snow about half an inch deep by eight A.M.

The buildings here were purely functional, and the snow did little to improve them. The blinds in one window opened, and a child peered out, watching the snow with pallid half-interest, like someone watching a theatrical performance over again despite not particularly caring for it the first time. The child appeared to be about ten years old, with large dark eyes and milky skin, straight dark hair and small triangular ears that twitched slightly. He turned his head with an unheard snarl, showing sharp teeth so thin as to be translucent around the edges, then moved away from the window.

A few minutes later, a door opened on one end of that same building, and a rather ordinary-looking middle-aged man wearing hospital scrubs emerged and trudged through the snow toward the next building. When he reached the door, he stopped, gave a world-weary sigh, and said,

“He’s waiting. Need I remind you of what happened the last time you were so hesitant?”

There was a moment’s pause, before the child peeked out of the open door

and answered,

“Yeah. They’re still replacing the floor.”

The child then looked down at the ground and muttered,

“Damned snow. Can it be any more wet?”

“I heard that. Now get over here.”

The child followed the man into the other building. Inside, a small aluminum table was set up, with two matching chairs. One of the chairs was already occupied, by a thin, gray-haired man with a narrow mustache, also dressed in scrubs. He was holding two small plastic cubes under the table, one in each hand. One was red, the other blue. The child let out a barely audible hissing sound, and then proclaimed, loudly and clearly faking enthusiasm,

“Good morning, Dr. Jenkins.”

The gray-haired man answered,

“Good morning. All I want you to do is tell me what colors these are.”

He produced the cubes and placed them on the table. The child answered, pointing at the red cube,

“Easy. That one’s red, and the other one’s black.”

Dr. Jenkins nodded in acknowledgment, and the other man escorted the child out again, then returned alone.

The other man remarked,

“That proves it. He can’t tell the difference.”

“Exactly as planned and predicted.”

Species Profile: Maçu

Origin: Gone, Northern Archipelago, early Eocene. Descended from stock derived from *Thomasia*, after the importation of the genus to Feverfog. Large (females up to 2.5m in height and 200kg in weight, males up to 1.75m and 150kg) biped. Largely durophagous, specializing in hard-shelled invertebrates, but will eat almost anything if it has to. Reddish brown or dark gray fur, with off-white throat patch, large round ears and a long bushy tail with a white tip. Mane of longer, darker hair runs from crown of head to base of tail. Brown eyes with round pupils. Four digits on hands, three on feet. Digits bear hooves. Broods single bluish-white egg internally, then lays it an hour or so prior to hatching. Gestation period: 7 months. Age at weaning: 3 years. Age at sexual maturity: 10 years. Lifespan: 100 years.

Dinner and a Freak Show

Mira had trusted her friends to set up a blind date for her, and she hoped that that trust wasn't unwarranted.

"Who could it be? Michael? Garret?" she murmured, fingering a lock of her unruly brown mane and then straightening a pleat on her skirt with a small hoofed hand. Everyone agreed that she was quite pretty, with her coppery coat and hazel eyes, so it was no wonder that many men (and a few women as well) were after her hand in marriage. Casting her gaze to the cherry tree overhead, she noticed the branches were covered in small, delicate blossoms.

"Must be that warm weather we've had lately."

She paused briefly, and wondered aloud, staring at the debris ring visible over the distant hills,

"Who might it be?"

The branches of the tree creaked ominously, and a voice answered from above,

"Be glad they didn't set you up with any of them. Commoners."

She looked up and screamed,

"You! Commoner yourself!"

“Hardly.”

Sitting among the branches was a young, pale-skinned man with empty dark eyes. He smiled at her, lips carefully closed. Mira told him,

“They’ll be expecting us, Victor.”

“Ah, yes, those atrocities you call Mother and Father, right?”

“Just because you didn’t have parents is no reason to insult mine.”

Mira marched off towards the restaurant. Victor watched her go, then leapt to the ground and followed. Mira was within sight of the restaurant, well-bred head high and white tail tip twitching, when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She let out a yelp, which was answered by a cackle from Victor. She wheeled around and raked him on the cheek with her hooves, drawing a trickle of foul-smelling blood.

“I won’t let you embarrass me while Mother is watching. Now keep your mouth shut and maybe we’ll be able to have a nice night.”

She picked up the pace and strolled into the restaurant. Her mother, a dignified maçu woman of about sixty, looked her up and down, then asked,

“Where are they? I thought you were bringing a date.”

Mira rolled her eyes, and answered,

“He’ll be along shortly.”

She sat down across the table from her mother, and cast her gaze across the room. There was another young couple seated near the far wall, staring into each others' eyes with expressions like drowsy rabbits, and an older woman near the fireplace in the center of the dining area, with a spindly college-age waiter taking her order on a pad of paper he held with the kind of reverent grip normally reserved for ancient books. Other than them, her parents, and herself, Mira saw that the room was empty, save for an obese, white Scottish Fold cat, the kind of pampered animal Mira's friend Li-in would say should be put to use as a doorstep. She glanced at her watch. Ten minutes had passed since she arrived, and Victor was nowhere in sight. **This is probably the build-up to another horrid prank, she thought. Hopefully there won't be any weasels this time.** She decided that she had no choice but to sit and wait. After about another three minutes, the cat got up and waddled over to the other young couple, and yowled,

"Yyrrrrroww!"

One of them looked away from her companion long enough to unwrap the pair of saltine crackers that came with her soup, and toss them into the cat's open mouth. It ate the crackers with a purr like a lawnmower engine. **Is it pest control, or portion control?** Mira asked herself. She started buttering one of the

rolls that were the table when she arrived, and was about to take a bite when she was interrupted by an insistent,

“Yyrrrrroww!”

The cat had darted to her side with a speed unbecoming a walking ball of lard, and was staring at the roll in her hand with hungry eyes. She looked down at it, and told it,

“No dice. Mine.”

With a snarl of rage, the cat leaped for her face. She put up a hand (unfortunately the one with the roll in it) to protect herself, and closed her eyes reflexively. When she opened them again, her hand was empty, and the cat was sitting on the floor a few feet away, licking butter from its muzzle. Mira looked around the room again. The woman by the fireplace had just gotten her entree, a large T-bone steak with a baked potato, and the cat hurried over to her. She looked at it suspiciously, like it might be diseased, then shrugged and dropped a chunk of potato in its mouth. The other young couple got up and headed for the salad bar. The cat trotted after them, then let out a loud,

“Yyrrrrroww!”

once they got there. They stared at it for a moment, then one of them picked up a serving spoon and ladled a quantity of ranch dressing into its mouth. The cat,

purring loudly, sashayed back over to the fireplace and flopped down to sleep. A minute or so more passed, then she saw Victor appear in the doorway.

“Did you miss me?”

“Most certainly not.”

Then she saw her mother glaring at him. She stuck her long muzzle in the air and remarked, “Those half-wit friends of yours had to ignore all the decent prospects and set you up that provincial lowlife, the one who paid for college in cash!”

Victor curled his lip and answered, “Like you’re any better. You made your fortune reselling books you got for five dollars a bag at ten dollars apiece!”

“That is a perfectly legitimate way to make money!”

“So is pole dancing.”

Mira’s mother gave an indignant sniff and said nothing. Mira’s father gestured to the waiter, who finished serving the other young couple a round of piña coladas, and hurried over.

“May I take your drink orders?”

Victor sat down uncomfortably close to Mira, and told him,

“Just a martini.”

Mira told him,

“Cola.”

“And the proud parents?”

Her mother said,

“Just water.”

Her father echoed,

“Just water.”

A few minutes later, he returned with their drinks and asked them,

“What will you be having tonight?”

Mira’s mother said,

“Braised veal.”

Victor said,

“Linguine with shrimp.”

Mira’s father said,

“Spinach lasagna.”

Mira’s mother told him,

“No one in this family is ordering a roadside weed, even an alien one.”

He looked crestfallen, until she told him,

“Get the tortellini, I hear they’re marvelous.”

“Okay.”

The waiter turned to Mira and asked,

“And the young lady will have?”

She pointed to Victor, and said,

“Same as him. Shrimp linguine.”

“Very well then.”

The waiter scurried off to the kitchen, and the cat materialized beside Victor and settled down to wait. When their food arrived, Victor plucked a shrimp off of Mira’s plate with his fork and flicked it to the cat, who caught it in mid-air and swallowed it whole.

“Couldn’t you have given it one of yours?”

Victor looked absolutely baffled for a moment, before answering,

“Why would I do that?”

“Because this plate is mine, not yours.”

“Oh.”

He then took one off his own plate and told the cat,

“I’ll give you this if you ask nicely.”

The cat sat up on its hind legs and meowed,

“Pweeze?”

Mira asked,

“Were you throwing your voice?”

Victor winked at her, smiled, and said to the cat,

“Excellent. For that you get three.”

He grabbed two more shrimp off Mira’s plate and tossed the lot into the cat’s open mouth. Mira snapped at him,

“Enough! Get out and take your cat with you!”

“My cat? I thought it lived here!”

“Waiter! Please get this animal out of here!”

The waiter yelled back,

“Isn’t it yours?”

Dance Dance Substitution

Chegwye Nehwe was mildly surprised. Being the young

maçu dignitary that he was, well-bred and well-reared, he was not expected to find one such as Woisha King attractive. But somehow, he did anyway. His mother Lady Mira would probably beat him if she caught him so much as looking at a 'mixed-blood horror' like Woisha, let alone talking to one. Chegwye secretly thought his mother's obsession with marrying one's own kind somewhat absurd, given that she had once pined over Woisha's father, who was and is a hybrid himself. Perhaps that business was why she hated such creatures. Chegwye took a sip of the insipid fizzy wine that was always served with dinner at this kind of diplomatic function, and chanced another glance at Woisha, after making sure his mother was not watching, of course. Woisha had her khii mother's delicate dog-like face, with small shell-shaped ears and a tiny rose-pink nose. She had her father's peculiar dark eyes with their trademark vertical slit pupils, and a ringing, almost metallic laugh that was also his. Chegwye, meanwhile, had to make do with the hyena-like features common to his species, modest by any standard. He touched a hand to a bulging temporalis and sighed inwardly. Tonight, Woisha was dressed in a long narrow black gown

with blue accents at the cuffs and hem, very fashionable these days. Currently, she was nodding politely to a story told by an aspiring suitor. Something about loaves of bread, from what Chegweye could hear of it. After assuring himself that his mother was occupied talking to someone else, Chegweye quietly strolled over to where Woisha was seated, and stood there for a moment trying to look comfortable, his long white-tipped tail twitching nervously. Woisha looked in his direction after what seemed like an eternity. Quietly, she asked him,

“Were you about to ask me anything, perhaps?”

Desperately trying not to stutter, he asked, while gesturing to the dance floor,

“May I have this dance, my Lady?”

After standing up, she answered,

“Of course. I would never turn you down.”

At this, they both stopped, seeing that Lady Mira was storming across the room toward them, looking furious. When she reached them, she glared at Woisha, and slapped Chegweye on the cheekbone, loudly scolding him in Maçu all the while. Woisha turned and slyly winked at Chegweye, letting him know that this would not end their fun by any means. They’d just have to wait until she was not looking.

Species Profile: Baaswe 'kana

Origin: Feverfog, Sansan Island, mid-Miocene. Small (both sexes to up 35cm and 300g) omnivorous quadruped. Green fur (contains symbiotic algæ) with large black stripes on body and black bands on tail. Tail almost as long as body. Five digits on all four paws. Digits bear nails. Lays three to five gray eggs, speckled with black, in any quiet, warm spot available, after brooding them internally for five weeks, then incubates them for three weeks. Pups hatch fully furred, but with eyes and ears closed. Eyes and ears open at eighteen to twenty days, pups are weaned at seven weeks and independent at four months. Lifespan: up 15 years.

Cupcake

Helga was busy. Far too busy to concern herself with the fact that there was a midnight service in progress. The closet where they stored candles? Too cold. Under the pulpit? Too noisy. Under a pew? Too many people stomping around. The pen where the sacrifices were kept? Too many sheep stomping around. The space under the altar was too exposed, the organ pipes too small, that box lined with a towel too drafty, every place was proving woefully inadequate.

Perhaps in here? One of the temple's patrons had left his coat behind on the floor in back a week ago, and hadn't come back for it. It stank of sulfur, but it was warm. She curled up inside, lifted her long black-and-green tail, and laid three speckled eggs. The *baaswe 'kana* groomed herself, then wrapped her body around her clutch and slept.

She dutifully turned them at regular intervals, and spent a week not daring to leave them long enough to eat. She raked her nails across the face of their father when he got too close.

One evening, after the service, the smell of smoke still hanging in the air, there was a tug on one of the sleeves. Helga screeched, trying to let whoever it

was know that the coat was occupied, and someone yelled.

“Woisha! Get back here!”

“Father, there’s a *baaswe ’kana* in your coat!”

“Really?”

The sound of footsteps was followed by a hand gently inserted between the buttons. Helga bit it, and it withdrew with a muttered expletive. Whoever it was, they tasted foul.

“Let’s just leave her alone for now, Father.”

“Very well.”

Another two weeks passed in much the same fashion, and now Helga could hear her pups chirping inside their eggs. She chirped back, and they responded in kind. They kept chirping, and she kept answering, for another day before the first cracks appeared in the shells. Slowly, the cracks expanded, until first one, then another, then the third broke free.

Helga gathered up the fragments of eggshell and shoved them into a sleeve, before turning back to the hatchlings and vigorously licking them dry until their fur fluffed. Then she stopped, blinking in confusion. Two of them looked normal enough, green, banded with black from ears to tail-tip, but one was pure white! This would never do. How could that one ever look after itself?

She heaved a sigh, muttered an apology, and picked up the white one. No choice in the matter. The males would get rid of it soon enough. She carried it out of the shelter of the coat, apologized again, as much to herself as to it, then left it. Almost immediately, there was a shout from the direction of the altar.

“Father! Look!”

“Woisha!”

“But Father, there’s a baby! And it’s white!”

Woisha ran over, bent and sniffed the tiny, shivering pup. The half-khii child thought it the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Gingerly, with all the reverence her father had drilled into her, she picked it up and cradled it in her hands.

“Can I keep it? Its mother doesn’t want it! I saw her leave it!”

Having finished his devotions, her father came over. For a moment, he simply glared up at the ceiling, refusing to look at his daughter or the pup.

“Please, daddy?”

Then the porcelain-colored face cracked into a smile, and he called for the priest.

“Shan!”

“Yes, my Lord?”

“Woisha seems to have found herself a pet. Can she take it? It’s your temple.”

“Yes, my Lord, but you paid for it to be built.”

“Answer the question.”

“If the mother doesn’t want it, you have my permission to take it.”

The pup spent the next two weeks in a cardboard box under a heat lamp, being fed from an eyedropper every two hours. Slowly, she opened her eyes and ears. By the time she was eighteen days old, she could see and hear and began to crawl around the box on unsteady legs. Woisha fed her and cleaned up after her during the night, her father by day, assuming duties after coming home from work.

One day, she crawled a little too far, and fell out, onto the carpet. She looked around. Woisha was not there and neither was her father. She could not see very well, being an albino, and so she sniffed the air tentatively. Catching Woisha’s scent, she toddled across the room and out the door. Down the hall she went, until, much to her shock, the floor suddenly ended. She dropped down, and landed with a bump on the top stair. She stopped and let out a wail of distress. That usually worked to summon help, but this time no one seemed to hear at first. Then a large white creature dropped down beside her. It stank, and

it was making strange noises. It struck her with a front paw, and sent her flying off the step. Out and then down she went, landing hard on the landing halfway down. Stunned by the impact, aware but unable to move, she lay there as the creature bounded down the stairs after her. It picked her up with one front paw, and carried her to the edge of the landing. It set her down, and then struck her again. Once again she flew out and then down, landing on her back at the bottom, knocking the breath out of her. The creature bounded down and stood over her for a moment, before grabbing her with both front paws around her chest and squeezing with tremendous strength. She tried to struggle, but it squeezed harder with every panicked breath she took. Soon, she was unconscious.

She awoke slowly. Every breath was agony, and she could not feel her hind legs or tail. There was a stranger holding her. He poked and prodded her, and then she passed out again.

When she woke up again, she was lying on something soft. Woisha was there. She could feel her hindquarters again, but the pain was even worse. She cried out, and Woisha murmured soothingly. Woisha's father was there too, and so was the strange creature. He was holding it by the ears, and telling it, "If she dies, I will give you every injury you inflicted on her. Understood?"

“But, my Lord! It’s only a *baaswe ’kana*! You tear cupcakes into little bits before you eat them! I thought playing with your food was acceptable!”

“SHE IS NOT FOOD! SHE IS MY DAUGHTER’S PET!”

“I didn’t know! I swear!”

“WE HAVE HAD HER IN THE HOUSE FOR THREE WEEKS NOW! I THOUGHT *YOU* COULD TAKE A HINT!”

Woisha murmurs,

“Cupcake. That’s an excellent name.”

Cupcake tried to purr, but it hurt too much.

Species Profile: Clawbearer

Origin: uncertain, probably somewhere in the vicinity of Procyon. One of the only true extraterrestrials known. May be responsible for the introduction of *Caracal*, *Mustela*, and *Nimbacinus* to Feverfog. Probably not responsible for the introduction of *Thomasia* or *Umaltolepis*. Medium to large (both sexes up to 2m in length and 100kg in weight) omnivorous biped, covered in thick, gray-brown fur with darker blotches from head to foot, with a heavy, mobile tail. Small black eyes almost concealed by fur, with round pupils. Eight digits on feet, six on hands. Digits bear namesake forked claws. Reproductive habits uncertain, but probably viviparous. Lifespan: up to 80 years, usually much less, due to vulnerability to certain common pathogens carried by other species.

On Tap

Ooo-wee-ooo! My phone awoke me. I yawned, then checked it. It was from Mother.

“Chirse té Buffalo wings,” it said.

Food names are the only foreign words she knows. Curse that Victor. Even if he is my boss, he had no right to teach her to text. It is my duty as her son to fulfill her every desire, but still!

I leapt from my sleeping perch and hurled myself across the tavern to the bar, eager to get this over with. The bartender, Chisak, gave an involuntary shudder at the sight of me. His pale fur was standing on end without him meaning it to. He’s a Clawbearer, traditionally my people’s favorite prey, and he’s still getting used to my presence not being a threat.

“Mother wants Buffalo wings. No ranch dressing, she hates that, remember.”

“Yeah.”

“I won’t bite you if it gets screwed up. No worries.”

He coughed, a deep, sputtering, wet sound. Is every Clawbearer sick these days? His forked claws flicked in and out with every heave, and a dribble of

blood came out the corner of his mouth. He flicked his thick, spotted tail and collected himself, before walking over to the kitchen door and giving Mother's order. I waited, because Mother prefers I serve her food myself. When the waiter, a small human female with pale hair and gray eyes, brought me the food, she paused and said,

"That'll be five-fifty."

"Mother's meals are always comped. So it's actually nothing."

She was clearly new here, as she shouted,

"Boss!"

Victor stalked over. His black eyes were as expressionless as ever. He tapped a slender finger-claw on the nearest table.

"Boss, he says he doesn't have to pay!"

"He doesn't. You want his mommy dearest to bite you? Now give him the wings before I decide you are surplus to requirements."

She set the basket down in front of me and beat a hasty retreat to the kitchen. I picked it up in my jaws by one edge and carried it to Mother's table. Mother set down her phone and vacuumed up a wing, swallowing it whole. She swiped a blue-black tongue over her lips and smiled at me. She is nearly twice my size, her white fur clotted with patches of silver. She looks very good for

ninety-two. She still has all her teeth save one, and she still grows a keratinous 'tail-leaf' every spring.

"Mew!"

Great. Our resident specter was back. Her name is Fabulæ, and she's the cutest dead kitten you will ever see. She scares the patrons, so Victor's sister Faith would have put her in the walk-in freezer with a catnip mouse about an hour earlier. But of course a door will not deter her if she wants attention. She'll just trot right through it. Chisak was making ritual gestures between coughs, and that new waitress was hiding behind a table. Victor called, "Fabulæ!" and made kissy noises.

Her transparent tail shot up, and she ran to him, right through Faith's leg. He stroked her as best he could, and pointed to the new waitress, saying,

"Say hello to Melanie."

Fabulæ went,

"Mrrr?"

"Yes, her. Over there."

He pointed again. Melanie was quaking with fear and reciting a prayer under her breath. Fabulæ, purring, ran over to her, through Faith's leg again, through several chairs and the table Melanie was hiding behind.

“EEEE!”

Melanie leaped backward about three feet, ending up sprawled on the floor in an undignified heap. Fabulæ paused for a moment, looking distinctly confused, then trotted over and started kneading her paws through Melanie’s chest. The new waitress fainted dead away. Victor made more kissy noises and waved a catnip mouse. Fabulæ ran back to him, and he tossed it on to a ledge of the cat tree hanging from the ceiling. Having no real concept of gravity, Fabulæ followed her toy through the air and then settled down for a good trip.

That night was a fundraiser to buy Chisak the expensive antibiotics he would need to clear his lungs of infection. Of course, if we didn’t raise enough money, Victor would simply give him the needed funds, not because he cared, but because he doesn’t like to give job interviews. And if Chisak didn’t recover, someone else would be needed for the job. Victor would rather play computer solitaire than hire new help. Tonight being special, he told me simply to chase away anyone who could not pay the cover charge. Normally, I would bite them. This is a respectable establishment, not a bloody Hooters, so not just anyone could get in. But we needed to raise money tonight, so I was to allow in anyone who could pay. So I had to let in a number of people who would normally never have seen the light of day again, ranging from stropky nouveau riche brats to

Victor's ex-girlfriends (of which there were several).

Ooo-wee-ooo! "Chirse té coconut shrimp."

"CAN SOMEONE GET MOTHER SOME COCONUT SHRIMP?! I'M ON THE CLOCK!"

No response.

"MELANIE! GET MY MOTHER AN ORDER OF COCONUT SHRIMP OR I'LL TELL FABULÆ YOU'VE GOT IMPORTED ORGANIC CATNIP!"

"yes, sir," she whimpered. Seriously, how scary can Fabulæ be? She's a kitten, for the love of God! She's dead, but she's still a kitten! She's adorable! But, whatever works to get the help in line.

"Name?"

"John Smith."

"Which one? There are six John Smiths on this."

"The one who emailed ahead."

"Three of them did. Perhaps a date of birth will help?"

"August 24th, 2060."

"Oh, that John Smith! VICTOR!"

Victor popped up from behind the speaker he was setting up by the stage and strolled over.

“Please, tell your brother to use a less common alias next time. He’s one of six John Smiths on the list.”

Victor’s brother shrugged and said,

“Usually a common name is a good idea.”

“You’re my kid brother. You can use your real name here. And you were allowed a plus one. Did you bring someone?”

Victor’s brother whistled, and a sleek, spotted cat with a black belly and gray head wriggled her way out of his loose-fitting coat and climbed onto his shoulder. Victor told him,

“Sweet Pea is banned from this establishment. She drank the Ambassador’s martini for her last time. Then she got stuck in a margarita pitcher, remember? Our health department grade is bad enough as it is!”

Victor’s brother pouted, and reached up to grab Sweet Pea and perhaps lock her in a storeroom, but she was no longer there. She was over at the bar, using her weight to operate a tap and score free Spotted Cow. Victor darted over, seized her by the scruff, set her under the bar, overturned a plastic milk crate on top of her and placed a keg on top of the crate. His brother looked stricken for a moment, until Faith handed him a brandy Old Fashioned.

“Name?”

“John Smith.”

“Which one?”

“The one with a tail.”

“Which one? There are three that would fit that description.”

“VICTOR!” he yelled.

Victor marched over and told him,

“You’re gonna need a better alias, little bro.”

I allowed him to pass. This happened several more times, as most of Victor’s brothers (and there are a lot of them) seemed to have used the same name to make reservations. And they all look pretty similar, tall, muscular and pale with dark hair.

“Name?”

Ooo-wee-ooo! “Excuse me, I have to take this,” I told them.

“*Chirse té* French dip sandwich.”

I texted her back,

“*Issi té ja. Sessa gilé sansanu. Feywu?* (You can’t eat that right now. It’s larger than you and you’ve already eaten. Maybe later?)”

Mother texted back,

“*CHICHIR JA TÉ AN!* (HOW DARE YOU SAY THAT!)”

I replied,

“*Za té henah fu.* (We’ll split it after my shift.)”

She did not answer, so I got back to work.

“Don’t you recognize me?”

I took a long look at the person at the front of the line. He was a strapping young khii, over eight feet in height with a fine coat of silver fur, a delicate wet pink nose and blue eyes. His small, pointed ears twitched.

“Wait a minute! Keith Preston?”

He grinned and nodded. I hadn’t seen him since his mother’s brother got custody after his mother died. The mother’s family is usually given custody under such circumstances. Victor was lucky to have kept any of his children.

“You were a cute little fur-ball! What the hell happened?!”

“Thirty years and grandma’s cooking.”

“Come in, your father will want to see you. Never thought you’d get bigger than him.”

Victor had apparently seen him, and was standing there looking shocked, which I got a good laugh out of. Nothing surprises him normally, and he looked ridiculous wearing that expression. Then he composed himself and came strolling over as calmly as he could manage. He barely came up to his son’s chest. I had

never thought anyone would make him seem small, but apparently Keith Preston could. They stood there, just staring, for a moment, before Keith asked,

“Can I get a martini, Dad?”

“Anything you want, son.”

“SHOWTIME PEOPLE!” Faith hollered, waving an arm toward the stage.

First, Victor did his fire-breather act. The only people applauding had never seen him drunk. Give him a bottle of vodka and we’ll lose at least one table.

Second act was my turn. I walked up to the stage on shaky legs. I am not used to performing. I tried to leap onto the bar-stool set in front of the mic, and missed. I went sailing over it and landed in a heap on the floor in front of the stage. I lay there for a moment, too mortified to move, before I heard a tiny purr and felt a wisp of a transparent tongue caress my face. Fabulæ was there, and she seemed to care. I pulled myself to my feet and climbed back on stage. I cleared my throat, gathered myself, and sang. First, I sang “25 or 6 to 4”.

“Sing something decent!” Victor shouted. So I sang “Still Not Ginger”.

“Sing something tasteful!” Mira shouted.

“He did!”

Just to spite her I launched into a rendition of “We Wish You Weren’t

Living With Us”, followed by “Walkin’ ’Round In Women’s Underwear”, “Cover Of The Rolling Stone” and “Itsy Bitsy Teeny Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini”.

Mira glowered but said nothing.

“Got any drinking songs?” one of the John Smiths asked.

Not sure which one of them. I sang several, including “Whisky Is The Life Of Man” and “The Rassilon Drinking Song”.

By the end of the night, we raised twice what we needed. Anything that was left over after Chisak’s medical bills were paid was quietly diverted to repaint Victor’s Bugatti. Someone keyed it. Possibly Mira.

As I tucked into the promised French dip with Mother, something brushed my side.

“Mrra?”

“I’m sorry, Fabulæ. Sandwiches are for the living. But I’ll play with you later. Someone left a toy on the floor. Big ball of foil. Might have actually been a fast food wrapper, but who cares? We can still have fun with it.”

“Prrrrrrrrrr...”

Species Profile: Vlisah

Origin: Feverfog, Sansan Island, earliest Pleistocene. Small (both sexes no more than 30cm in length and 1.5kg in weight) sanguinivorous quadruped. Dental formula $(I^3C^1P^0M^0)/(I_3C_1P_0M_0) = 16$. Descended from terrestrial genus *Caraca*, which was imported by an unknown party in the late Pliocene. Gives live birth to one or two kittens, which may stay with the mother for up to two years. Gestation period: 2 months. Age at weaning: six weeks. Age at sexual maturity: seven months. Lifespan: up to 30 years.

It's a Sordid Story

One night, I woke up, and went down to the edge of the deep tunnels to explore down there. I live in the upper tunnels, mostly, because the lower ones are partly full of water. That's when I heard it.

"Whisky is the life of man, always was since the world began..."

The lower tunnels are supposed to be vacant. Only my master goes down there, and he cannot sing. He sounds like a drowning daanh when he tries, and he knows it. We've had intruders before, and it was horrible. I nearly died when they tried to force us out, and my master had to get a new arm.

I ran, tail bushed out in fright. Up the passage, around the corner, up the ladder and down the passage above. When I came to the bulkhead, it had closed again. I panicked, forgetting where the switch was, and yowled in fear, racing back and forth. One of my paws must have hit the switch, because the bulkhead creaked open.

I dashed through, and around another corner. After running for a while longer, I calmed a bit and slowed down, enough that when I came to another closed bulkhead, I simply stopped and pressed the switch. I realized that I had better tell my master about the singing intruder. He would know what to do

about them. I cast about for his scent. It was faint and stale. He had not been here in at least three days. I retraced my steps, back to the turn I had made away from my sleeping place. The scent was fresher here, and I could find him if I followed the trail from here.

I followed the scent up to one of the lifts leading to the surface. I was pretty sure this one came up in the storeroom of a chain hardware store. Was it worth the risk to follow him? I didn't want to stay down here if there was an intruder, but the people up there would not know me and might be frightened.

I decided I would rather follow. I leaped up and hit the button, before darting inside. I leaped again and hit the 'ground floor' button, then waited. When the doors opened again, I walked out, checking for scent.

"Ai! He said he had a cat, not a vlisah!"

"She won't hurt you!"

I found myself being scooped up in an unfamiliar person's arms. I looked into his long-snouted face and told him,

"Please put me down. There's an intruder in the tunnels and my master needs to know."

"Awww....miao miao to you, too!"

"What we have here is a failure to communicate."

“Awww...”

So I bit the big khii. It was risky, he could have torn me apart, but he just dropped me, and I ran out the door into the main part of the store. I knocked over a display of resistors, sending them flying. I dodged and weaved as the employees tried to catch me, all the while getting closer to the front entrance. Suddenly, the khii I bit was blocking the door.

“You little bastard!”

I ran straight between his legs and out into the gathering dusk. I kept running for what seemed like an eternity, until I was sure no one was following. Then I had another problem. I had lost the trail.

I couldn't retrace my steps in case someone from the store was back that way, but I needed to find my master. Then I smelled it. Sulfur. The area was unfamiliar, but the odor was not. My master's brother had been here recently, and he has a chakurah in his service. This particular chakurah has pursued me in the past, and where his master goes, he goes. I turned away from the scent and headed off in a different direction, hoping to either find the trail I was following again or meet someone more hospitable than Charles and his master.

Damn. I rounded the corner and ran straight into Charles. Thankfully for me, he was busy attacking a dog he thought had insulted his mother.

Female chakurah are dominant, and Charles holds his mother in high esteem, even though she is in her nineties and he has to take care of her. Not wanting to watch the inevitable outcome (Charles may not be much larger than me, but his bite could probably fell a rhinoceros), I turned away again.

“Ai!”

Shit. He saw me. Time to run. I turned and put on a burst of speed, tail held out for balance, hoping that he would be unable to catch up. Running is really not his thing. I chanced a glance back, and cursed inwardly. He’d climbed an *Ailanthus* planted by the curb, and was jumping from street tree to street tree, the long keratinous structure on the end of his tail held over his back. He was almost upon me, when I collided with someone’s ankle. I was momentarily stunned, and Charles gave a screech of triumph, then leaped, only to be snatched out of the air by the scruff before he could get to me.

“Charles! Don’t I feed you enough?”

“Yes, master. But I want to hunt!”

“Do you want to offend my brother? He’ll drown you! And me for that matter! Hunt something else!”

I found myself looking up into the nearly black eyes of Victor, my master’s brother. He looked down at me and grabbed me by the scruff, holding me out of

reach of Charles. He set Charles down again, and gave him a tap on the rump with the toe of his sneaker.

Charles muttered,

“Chirrrchireet!” and sidled off. Victor told his retreating form,

“No can do, mister. I didn’t hatch from an egg, and even if I did, I wouldn’t have access to the shell.”

Then Victor asked me,

“What are you doing above-ground? Are you lost? Do you want to go home?”

I told him I didn’t want to go home, that I was looking for my master.

He told me,

“I think I smelled him down by the shopping mall. He meets customers there. Nice crowds to cover shady dealings among.”

He carried me to his car, an old Earth model, circa 2006. He pulled a carrier out of it, and placed me inside. It stank of chakurah in there. They always smell of death, and Charles, who I could safely presume was its usual occupant, was and is no exception. The fur along my spine bristled automatically, and it took some effort to lay it flat again.

He placed the carrier back in the car, got in and drove away. It couldn’t

have been more than ten minutes before we got there, but sitting in the dark with predator-scent in my nostrils, it seemed like hours.

When we got there, Victor let me out, unlocked a side door, and propped it open.

The mall had just closed for the night, and I walked down the empty corridors in silence. I came to the security guards' station. There was one person there, and he was asleep. It was then that I realized how hungry I was. I stalked up to him, leaped onto his chair, and, checking that he was still sleeping, licked his wrist and then made a tiny bite. I lapped his blood, filling my stomach. Blood is mostly water, so when I moved on, I stopped and urinated on the doorway of a Hollister.

I was in luck. My master was here recently, perhaps an hour ago, just as Victor had said. For once, he wasn't lying. I started following his scent again. It was difficult with all the other smells: people, dogs, cosmetics, fried stuff; but I managed. There was another scent mixed with his, that reminded me of the stuff he gave to that horrid old maçu woman in exchange for me. What was it again? Oh yes, plastic explosives. I was so young then, in body and in mind, that it's hard to remember sometimes what happened to me then.

The front doors of the mall were locked, so I took the side exit out again.

An alien creature hissed at me, but it didn't smell like a carnivore, so I ignored it and kept moving. I saw out of the corner of my eye that it was searching for discarded cigarette butts. It picked one up, put it in its mouth and lit it.

Disgusting. Did its mother teach it anything at all? Turning back to the task at hand, I noticed a second scent following that of my master. Human, probably female.

Master must be working. Perhaps I should go back and wait for him. The nearest way down was a staircase in the basement of a popcorn shop. I followed the smell of cheese and melted butter, and squeezed in through a window left open to allow the smell to spread. There was no one inside who could see me, and I hurried into the basement and down the stairs. His usual sleeping place was nearby. He likes the smell. I paced for a moment, then sat down and waited.

When he returned, it was with a human woman, the one I had smelled earlier. I followed him into the room and told him,

"Master!"

"Not right now. I'm busy. Scoot!"

He picked me up, carried me out of the room, set me down, and went back in, shutting the door in my face. When the door eventually opened, the human woman came out, followed by my master, holding a can of soda. She was

carrying a bulging bag with a department store logo on it. I could see the muzzle of a rifle sticking out.

“Pleasure doing business with you.”

“The same.”

He escorted her back to the surface, then came back and saw me waiting.

“What is it?”

“There’s an intruder! In the lower tunnels!”

“AN INTRUDER?! HOW DARE THEY!”

He took off running, and I was hard-pressed to keep up. When we reached the spot where I had heard the intruder, it had had moved on to another song, one I had heard Charles sing when he was stoned on catnip. My master shouted,

“WHO ARE YOU?! SHOW YOURSELF!”

Just then I saw a rounded mouth sticking out of the water, behind which was a protruding dorsal fin. A singing fish? I thought Victor’s ghost kitten was the strangest thing I would ever see, but this took the biscuit. The fish swam closer, and spoke.

“Greetings. I presume these are your tunnels?”

My master was taken a bit off-guard, and covered his surprise by

snapping back,

“Yes! Who are you and what do you want?!”

“I was washed into these tunnels from their inlet up in the mountains during the last spring floods. My family are entertainers by trade, and if you will permit me to stay, I will gladly sing for you.”

“I guess you can stay, provided you don’t eat my cat.”

“Is that her? I think I have just the tune for a pretty girl like her.”

He coughed, then began to sing.

Species Profile: se'Puur

Origin: Feverfog, Sansan Island, mid-Miocene. Medium (1.5m in height, 45kg in weight) non-obligate quadruped. Close relative of the chakurah, which it resembles strongly, but much larger, with darker fur and longer, off-white horns that meet in a buffalo-like boss. Lacks functional venom-delivery system. Eyes brown, pupils round. Five digits on hands, with panda-like false 'thumb'. Two digits on feet. Hyper-dimensional. Strictly solitary with respect to its own kind, but may associate with other species. Reproduces asexually, laying single egg that looks like a larger version of its relative's with colors somewhat washed out. No males exist. Mother will conceal egg, and then offspring, usually in warm, quiet place, such as an attic, boiler room, or well-lined burrow appropriated from another animal. Gestation period: as in chakurah. Age at maturity: as in chakurah. Lifespan: uncertain.

You Look Smashing!

A week after his seventeenth birthday and almost a year after 'leaving home', Victor was sitting with his back against a large granite boulder on the slope facing away from the nearest town, watching the grand spectacle of an alien sunset, made even grander by his sensitivity to infrared.

He remained there for some time, watching the first evening stars appear, when a strange noise sounded from somewhere down the slope, something like a dog coming down with laryngitis attempting to bark.

Looking down the slope, he could see some kind of small animal, resembling a fox, but standing on its hind legs. It was sniffing around near a pile of boulders, apparently taking no notice of him. Just then there was a popping sound from behind him, and he was bowled over by something large and rough-furred colliding with him at fairly high speed. He and this creature went tumbling down the slope, coming to a jarring halt with the aid of a scraggly mesquite-like shrub at the bottom. The fox-thing stood nearby, staring in apparent fascination. Victor snapped at it,

"What are you staring at?!"

and it dashed off yipping in a distinctly gleeful tone. The other creature was still lying

on top of him, and he takes a good long look before speaking to it. It had a rectangular head with pale curled goat horns, black fur, large eyes, and oddly enough, hands with two thumbs.

“Just what the hell are you, anyway?”

The response echoed inside his head,

A se'puur.

“Why are you here?”

To be with you.

“What's your name?”

Lælaps. Your name is?

“Call me Victor.”

I think this will work better than Milord Kiigu said it would.

“Who's that?”

A spirit. He looked like your friend Shan once.

“What does he look like now?”

Like Shan.

“Right. Shall we find some place better to discuss this?”

Yes. Some coffee would be nice, too. Inter-dimensional travel is very tiring.

“I’ll pretend you didn’t say that.”

And I’ll pretend you don’t smell like a dead *ha’kana*.

“Enough.”

There Will Be Blood Oranges

Víctor stood on a street-corner, the se’puur Lælaps beside him.

This is the right place, you’re sure? We, uh, need those ‘items’.

She did not answer. There was a scraping sound nearby, and a section of sidewalk a few feet away seemed to vanish, revealing a narrow curving staircase descending into the ground. Seated about halfway down the flight of steps was his brother Ergot, grinning. He got up and started down the stairs. They followed, and the sidewalk reappeared behind them.

They spent several minutes walking before they came to a stop in front of a security bulkhead. Ergot turned to what appeared to be an intercom beside it and pressed a button. There was a muffled electronic beeping noise somewhere on the other side, then someone answered through the intercom,

“Mruh?”

Ergot rolled his eyes, and answered back,

“Push the button Sweet Pea.”

The reply was a confused-sounding,

“Miaw?”

Sounding exasperated, Ergot answered,

“The big button that says ‘Push’ on it, Sweet Pea.”

There was a moment’s silence, then the soft click of a button being pushed, before the bulkhead opened with a creak of rusting machinery. Sitting in front of the other intercom panel was Sweet Pea. She leapt onto Ergot’s shoulder and he scratched her under the chin with his robotic hand, murmuring,

“Good girl Sweet Pea.”

She purred loudly, and then Ergot kept walking down the passage with her perched on his shoulder, with Victor and Lælaps following after exchanging a knowing look. Charles could be heard singing something softly from the carrier in Victor’s hand. It sounded like Rossini’s ‘Cat Duet’. Sweet Pea soon joined in as the second soprano.

Shall we talk business?

Tomorrow. You are staying for dinner?

Later that same day, about sunset in fact, having had his fill of his brother's insipid cooking, Victor decided to go to bed early.

Having finally located a dry place to sleep, namely, a futon beside the door to what served as pantry-cum-larder for his brother, he was about to fall asleep when a rustling noise, followed by the dull thud of the pantry door shutting, awakened him.

Cautiously, he sidled up to the pantry door and opened it just a bit. He could see a large aseptic carton of orange juice on a shelf at about his eye level near the far wall, and Sweet Pea, who was just inside the door on the floor, doing a very good job of ignoring him completely. She appeared to be intently studying the shelves below the one where the carton was placed.

Light as a feather on the breeze, she took about three steps forward, stopped, and glanced warily at the orange juice carton. Having satisfied herself that she had not been seen by it, she took about three more steps forward, stopped, and glanced warily at the carton again.

Victor, meanwhile, could barely stop himself from bursting out laughing. The carton, meanwhile, hadn't moved, so Sweet Pea leaped onto the shelf below

it and paused, listening, all the while looking the picture of feline cunning and caution.

After a moment, she leaped onto the shelf containing the carton and scooted behind a nearby bag of flour for a moment, before circling around the carton, taking advantage of the cover provided by several jars of coffee grounds, and approaching it slowly from the opposite direction.

Then she leaped and landed lightly on top of the carton, paused momentarily, and gnawed a tiny hole in the cardboard with her incisors. Juice spurted out and she drank with a greedy sucking sound until she could get no more from it. Then she leaped off the shelf to the floor and darted out the door, brushing against Victor's ankle on the way out but taking no notice. As soon as she was out of sight he let out a smug cackle and returned to his spot on the futon, where the rest of the night passed without incident.

Latte Be

The next morning, having concluded their business, Victor and Lælaps met with Charles (who went ahead to reserve the room) and Fabulæ at a nearby hotel for a much-needed day off. They noticed that the terrified maçu behind the front desk was chanting something unintelligible in a high, singsong voice and waving a slip of vellum that looked to have once been part of an illuminated manuscript at Fabulæ, who was seated on the rug in front of the desk, purring invitingly and giving him cute looks, her fore-paws buried in the carpet as she gently kneaded the sub-floor. Victor looked at Charles, who was sitting nearby holding an empty paper cup, and asked him,

First, how long has this been going on?

Charles glanced at the clock on the wall for a moment before answering,

Seventeenminutestwelveandtwothirdsseconds.

Rolling his dark eyes, Victor told him,

Second, you're not supposed to have coffee. I told you that before.

Charles answered,

Whatcoffeethatwaswaterwaterwater. Uhhuhitwaswater. Waterwaterwater.

Mmmmmmyummyummywaterwaterwater.

Victor took a deep breath before continuing,

More importantly, did you get us a room?

The clerk says the price has gone up. You didn't give me enough for a proper bribe.

Bak sheesh costs money you know. Then she showed up and it all went to naraku.

Victor sighed and turned back to Fabulæ and the hysterical desk clerk, telling the clerk,

"I'll take care of this. She's with us."

With a nod to Lælaps, he told her,

This would be an appropriate time for what we found in that closet, right?

Lælaps nodded and produced a small metal cylinder from the thin leather carrying pouch around her neck. She opened the cylinder and produced from it a little collar of braided silver, attached to a delicate golden lead about two meters long. She handed it to Victor, who bent down and looped the collar around Fabulæ's ethereal neck. Somehow, it did not fall right through her like any solid object in its right mind would, but stayed there suspended. Taking the other end of the lead around his left wrist, he asked the clerk,

“Calm down, and tell me how much a room is per night.”

Gasping, the clerk told him,

“Thirty-two *tais* for you, Commander.”

“Excellent.”

“Don’t forget the spa, Milord. I could use a good *pizzichili*.”

“Spa day passes are 5 *tais* extra.”

“Three, please.”

“Yeahmassage mudbathfacial!”

“YOU need to detox first, little guy.”